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A letter to the landowners
of Great Britain and Ireland on
the advantages that would result
from taking off the tax on malt.
[2nd ed.]



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A LETTER

TO

THE LANDOWNERS

OF

GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND,

ON THE

ADVANTAGES THAT WOULD RESULT FROM TAKING OFF THE

TAX ON MALT.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON :
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No. XXXV

Will be published on April 1, and will be illustrated by a fine engraving by Landseer, of Lord Spencer's Ox, exhibited at the last Christmas Cattle Show.

A LETTER
TO THE
LANDOWNERS OF GREAT BRITAIN,

&c. &c.

THE present depressed state of the agricultural interest is a subject of fearful concern, not only to the landowners, but to the community at large. The most enlightened philosophers and statesmen in all ages and countries have looked upon agriculture as the basis of sound national prosperity, and have considered it the first and most important object of attention, to all who valued and regarded the welfare of mankind. But not to enter into any discussion on the abstract advantages which it produces, when compared with those that result from commerce and manufactures, it is sufficient to remark, that in these islands, where so many thousands depend on agriculture even for their daily subsistence, where so great part of the national wealth is derived from the profits of capital invested in agricultural pursuits, and where so large a proportion of the people must always be fed from the native produce of the country; the decay of this great and paramount interest must be productive of deadly consequences to the state, and strikes at the very root both of social happiness and national prosperity. I would say to those who are

sceptical on this point, Go, take your station in the heart of any of the great agricultural districts ; view the numbers of the peasantry who subsist on their toil and labour in cultivating the soil ; count the farm-houses scattered over the face of the land, the inmates of which are all dependent on agriculture ; visit the market-towns, the shopkeepers of which earn their livelihood in a principal degree by the goods sold to the agriculturists of the neighbourhood ; take into account the effect produced by this rural traffic on the great emporiums of trade ; and then ask yourselves, What would be, what must be the consequences, if these masses of peasantry were thrown out of employment ; if these habitations of land-owners were rendered desolate, and their proprietors bankrupt ; if these country towns and village marts, which, like the arteries in the human body, convey throughout the system the life-blood of trade, were to be paralyzed, and the circulation of wealth thus to be obstructed ? What could result but rural insurrections, national decay and bankruptcy, and the total, irretrievable, inevitable ruin of that manufacturing greatness which we at present enjoy, and are justly proud of, but which would not survive a day the ruin of its kindred and sister interest ? *Such would be* the certain consequences of the downfall of the landed interests of Great Britain ; *such is* the crisis to which we are approaching ; *such* the gulf in which we are threatened to be swallowed, unless prompt and efficacious measures are taken to raise those interests from their present low condition. It may be very well for philosophers in their closets to draw out on paper schemes of polity, and indulge in Utopian

projects. This is a very pleasant occupation ; and as long as these schemes and projects are confined to the closet or the school, no one will quarrel with them. But statesmen must remember, that they have neither to deal with a race of philosophers nor of sophists, but with the practical affairs of men ; and that their business is to consider, not what system or what theory may in itself be the most perfect, but what is practicable, and what most likely to be beneficial in the existing state of the world. Thus the doctrine of free-trade—what can be more beautiful in theory ? Let each country, say its advocates, produce those commodities for which it is best adapted ; throw open the ports of England ; admit foreign corn ; and, in return, let other states take our manufactured goods ; thus will a beautiful equilibrium be preserved, and a boundless prospect be opened to the accumulation of wealth.

Now this, the *pure* doctrine of free trade, is most beautiful as a theory ; no one can dispute it in a lecture-room ; no one question it in a treatise ; but the point for English statesmen to consider is, what effect would this doctrine have on the welfare of Britain ? How would it stand the friction of human prejudices, of human passions, and interests ? It is not enough that the engine should work well on the smooth floor of the philosopher's room ; we must see it out in the highways, and ascertain whether it would be able to surmount the inequalities of ground, and the obstructions which nature opposes to the working of art.

But view the question in another light : I would ask those who under-rate the advantages of agriculture,

to tell us how they propose to support the agricultural labourers, if the demand for their labour should cease, or in any great degree be diminished. The number of families employed in agriculture amounts to 961,100; of these, the greater proportion are daily labourers. Now, I ask, what is to become of these men, if, from the diminution of agricultural capital, there is no longer a demand for their labour? The advocates of a free-trade in corn are called upon to prove how they would dispose of them; and until this question is satisfactorily answered, it is a sufficient argument against the adoption of their measures. They will tell us, perhaps, that the capital now employed in agriculture would be transferred to manufactures; that with the decrease of agricultural, there would be a proportionate increase in the demand for manufacturing labour; and that, consequently, those who were no longer required to till the land, would find plenty of employment in the large manufacturing towns. But here, again, we have another proof how unsafe it is to trust to theory in the practical business of life. I shrewdly suspect, that when these economical magicians should wave their wands, and bid ploughmen be transformed into weavers and spinners, they would find the limbs and capacity of the former not quite obedient to their call. What, indeed, could be more palpably absurd, than to propose that men who had always lived in the open air, who had been accustomed to active labour, should suddenly be immured in the heated and close workshops of Manchester and Birmingham; should be constrained to sedentary habits, and be required to engage in works, any

proficiency in which is only to be acquired by long habits from early infancy? The thing is physically impossible; nor would the masters take such workmen. What, then, I again ask the advocates of free-trade, what do you propose to do with the rural population, when your plans shall have deprived them of their present means of employment?

The advantages of agriculture, the necessity of supporting the landed interest in the present condition of society in these islands, cannot, I apprehend, be questioned. Equally certain, I fear, is the fact, that those interests are at the present moment in a state of severe and *increasing* depression; a fact, indeed, which, after the voluminous reports and evidence presented to the public, it is superfluous to offer any proofs of. The Committee of the House of Commons appointed last year to investigate the subject, presented in their Report a frightful and appalling picture of the evils which at present oppress agriculture. The general result of their inquiries seems to amount to this:—That lands to a considerable extent have been deteriorated by scourging, over-cropping, and similar processes, to which the farmers have been driven from poverty; inferior modes of tillage have been resorted to; and comparatively very few labourers are regularly employed. Taking the counties of Somersetshire, Hampshire, North Wiltshire, and Kent, it may be safely predicted, that an abatement of rent to the amount of not less than 25 per cent. is unavoidable on good lands; and that inferior soils must soon be uncultivated and untenanted. Produce is at a price so very much below the price of labour, that lands

have not been half properly cultivated ; and the labourers, in consequence, have been thrown on the parish ; thus adding to the increasing amount of poors' rates ; and the last item in this catalogue of woe is perhaps the most alarming—that instead of diminishing, all these evils are daily increasing.

It is not the part of wisdom to be blind to impending evil. The true knowledge of the extent of our danger is the first step towards effectually averting it. We may, if we please, turn our looks from the approaching tempest, but it will come not the less, because we shut our eyes to its perils. It is the more manly, as well as the wiser course, to look stedfastly at our position ; to mark attentively the breakers towards which the vessel of the State is rapidly drifting, and to consider, whether even now, at the eleventh hour, there is not left some chance of safety. But this will not be found in idle guessing and vague discourses, nor in trusting to the “ chapter of accidents ;” not in catching, like the despairing mariner, at each straw that floats by us, but in making a manly and vigorous effort to extricate ourselves. “ Do you wish,” said Demosthenes to the Athenians, “ sauntering up and down the public places, to ask, “ ‘ What news to-day ? Is Philip dead ? ’ ‘ Most assuredly not ! ’ ‘ He is very ill though ? ’ What matters “ it to you, men of Athens ! whether Philip be dead “ or sick ; for he has not succeeded so much by his “ own vigour, as by that shameful apathy of your- “ selves, which you must now lay aside.” No unapt resemblance this conduct exhibits to that of those modern politicians, who, admitting the full extent of the danger, and sorely afraid of it, yet perversely re-

fuse to take any step to ward it off; but with folded arms complacently mark its progress; trusting that Parliament may do this, that the Government may do that; that this or that Peer, or Right Honourable Gentleman, may be called to the helm of affairs; and that when so called, he may chance to take some steps for their relief. Miserable policy! infatuated apathy! thus to trust to chance, to accident, even to the predilection of this or that particular statesman, the vital interests of the kingdom and the welfare of the commonwealth! I would have, then, the friends of the country arouse from their lethargy; the danger is imminent, “*instat, ardet, urget.*” Is there yet no hope for Britain? Is no safety to be found in her councils?

Convinced as I am of the critical nature of our position, and sensible as I feel of the perils that environ us, I have ventured to submit for the consideration of the public the following sketch of the advantages which, it appears to me, would result from taking off the present duty on malt. Not presuming to offer this as an infallible nostrum; not supposing that this one step can of itself relieve the landed interest of its burdens; but suggesting it as one, which, in conjunction with other remedial acts, may tend to mitigate the evil, and may thus conduce to the well-being of the empire.

Nothing would tend so much as this measure to the comfort and happiness of the people; and I have been favoured with a statement from a gentleman practically conversant with the subject, which places its advantages in a striking point of view. The present price of what is called best beer in London,

he observes, is 8*d.* per quart ; and there is some as low as 6*d.* per quart. Six bushels of malt and six pounds of hops are the highest quantities used in brewing the best beer. The average price of barley has been throughout the year below the prohibitory price ; *viz.* 4*s.* per bushel. Now let us take six bushels of malt at 4*s.* per bushel ; the duty at 2*s.* 7*d.* per bushel ; and 6 lbs. of hops at 6*s.* ; it is apparent at once what an amazing difference the tax makes to the consumer. Supposing the price of beer to be 8*d.* per quart, there is a positive loss thus incurred of 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ *d.* to the consumer ; or nearly the amount of a day's labour in some parts of the kingdom.

Now let us suppose the present average price of barley to be 4*s.* and hops 1*s.* per lb. and allowing four bushels to the hogshead, which would make the beer strong enough for labouring men ; the cost would be 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ *d.* per quart, and for three pints 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ *d.* per day ; a saving of 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ *d.* per day at the present higher price of 8*d.* per quart ; or 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ *d.* per day at the price of 6*d.* per quart.

It is further to be observed, that the wash and yeast would in many instances pay the expense of brewing.

But not only would the abolition of the malt tax enable the labourers to drink good and wholesome beer, it would also render them able to obtain bread at a cheaper rate and of a superior quality.

Nothing is so difficult at present for the poor man as to obtain good yeast. Now if he brewed at home, he could use his own yeast for baking ; and thus, by the simple repeal of this tax, would the legislature give the people the staff of life, good

bread, and the staple beverage of Britons, good beer. Nothing could be more beneficial to the nation than to encourage in the people the habit of brewing and baking at home, and to put it in their power to do so. Take the present price of wheat at 6s. per bushel ; seven bushels will make a sack of best flour 42s., which will make ninety-six quartern loaves of 4 lbs. each, selling at an average of 7d. per loaf.

I shall no doubt be at once met by the objection, "the common people would not brew at home." But it is so easy for them to do so, and the advantages that would result to them from so doing are so considerable, that I really cannot believe that Englishmen would be so blind to their own interests, or so slothful, as to neglect to avail themselves of the proffered boon.

Whatever theorists may have advanced to the contrary, I apprehend all rational and reflecting men are now convinced that the beer-shops and gin-shops are the curse and bane of the country. The peasant, wearied with his day's labour, resorts to these seats of iniquity ; there he too often meets with papers of the most inflammatory description ; there are fires plotted ; there are rural insurrections planned ; there are crimes of all descriptions discussed and projected ; there are the moral feelings and physical strength of the once "bold peasantry" of Britain miserably shipwrecked. Financiers will tell us the amount of revenue they derive from these haunts of iniquity ; do they calculate the moral and political evils they engender ? Well and truly has the poet sung :

“ Princes and kings may flourish and may fade,
 “ A breath can make them, as a breath has made ;
 “ But a hold peasantry, their country’s pride,
 “ When *once* destroyed, can *never* be supplied.”

Systems of finance may be at any time contrived ; alterations in these systems the wit of man always has, and always will effect ; but who shall restore the fallen character of the peasant ? or what will avail those money bags piled up in ostentatious display, if the basis on which they should rest is sapped and undermined ; if the independent feelings of the people are extinguished, and their strength wasted and decayed ?

These evils cannot be stayed, these ills cannot be rectified, by penal enactments and police regulations. In one short sentence lies the cure : “ Remove the temptation.” Put it in the power of the people to brew for themselves ; enable them to drink wholesome beer by their own firesides after their day’s labour, and you will do more to preserve the peace of the country, more to improve the character of the people, than by all the acts of parliament on the statute book.

This is, however, but a portion of the benefits that would ensue. There is nothing that would be so advantageous to the farmers, especially on the poor light lands, as the abolition of this impost. An able writer on this subject has calculated, that the additional wealth which would flow into the channels of agriculture from an increased growth of barley, would itself in a great degree raise it from its present depressed condition *.

* Edin. Rev. vol. xlix.

Not only, as he justly remarks, would the growers of barley derive great benefit, but if more barley were sown, there would be an increase of turnip husbandry; and in consequence of this again, more sheep would be kept. The farmers on the poor and light soils too, are those who are most distressed at present, and who most stand in need of relief; land which is not, and cannot be worth much for any other use, might be rendered valuable by the growth of barley, which exhausts the soil little in comparison with other crops, and contributes greatly to manure. Mr. Poppy of Witnesham has recently published a statement, in which the injurious effects of the duty on malt are amply developed, and in which he sets forth the various uses to which barley is applicable, and the advantages that would result, if, from abolishing the duty, its price were lowered. "Barley," he remarks, "being one of our
 " greatest staple articles and sources of riches, by
 " giving employment to thousands of thousands in
 " its cultivation, harvesting, threshing, malting, brew-
 " ing, distilling, vinegar-making, transit, and vending
 " in all its various stages and forms, and creating a
 " vast revenue indirectly; it is surely most grievous
 " and impolitic to reduce its consumption by a heavy
 " duty and restrictions—to paralyse the exertions of
 " the cultivators of the soil—to reduce their means
 " of giving employment to the increasing population,
 " and also of allowing beer to their workmen—to
 " throw the labourers and working maltsters and
 " others out of employment—if by possibility the
 " duty on malt can be given up: and it most as-
 " suredly may."

Is it not surprising, that the cultivation of an article, so productive of advantages, should, notwithstanding the great increase in the population, have advanced so little for the last 120 years? Yet, incredible as it may appear, such is the fact.

Years.	Quarters.	Average Bushels.
From 1703 to 1713	2,959,063	7
— 1713 to 1723	3,542,157	2
— 1723 to 1733	3,358,071	2
— 1733 to 1743	3,215,094	2
— 1743 to 1753	3,404,026	1*

During part of this period, families were allowed to compound for the duty; and, consequently, more malt must have been consumed than appears on the face of these records, which present us with the startling fact, that in 1750, when the population of England and Wales amounted to 6,467,700, more malt was consumed than in 1828, when it amounted to 13,500,000.

The reduction of part of the duty would do but little good; the whole of the tax, with all its odious, absurd, ridiculous, and antiquated machinery, ought to be swept away. It would puzzle the wit of man to devise such a mass of absurdity, as the acts relative to malting present. Instead of its being left to the ingenuity and ability of maltsters to discover the best and most economical processes, they are tied down by various Acts of Parliament as to the implements they may use, the use of those implements, and (folly on folly! still the last the strangest!) even as to the length of time during which they may cover the barley with water!

* Mr. Charles Smith's Tracts on the Corn Laws.

It is argued by all writers on the state of Ireland, that nothing would tend so much to its welfare as an increase of tillage; and it is needless to observe how much this would be furthered by the abolition of the malt duty. And let me observe, that it is the bounden, the imperative, the sacred duty of English legislators, to strive, with all their strength and might, to ameliorate the condition of that important but afflicted portion of the empire; and few measures can be conceived more likely to effect these ends, than the abolition of a duty which interferes so much with the culture of one of the main products of the soil*.

But it may be said, All this may be very true; the ills that result from the malt tax may be very great; the advantages that would result from its abolition may be considerable: but how can the revenue spare so large a sum? This is the general answer of every Minister when it is proposed to abolish a tax; and is often as little worthy of attention, as I believe it would be found in the present instance.

If the duty on malt were abolished, there can be little doubt that the increased consumption of the article would in itself go some way towards supplying the deficiency. At the present moment it would

* “ Besides the arable and pasture lands to be improved, “ there are estimated to be three millions of Irish, equal to five “ millions of English acres of unreclaimed land in Ireland, which “ would yield an additional produce annually of the value of ten “ millions sterling, to be divided, and afford a settlement for “ half a million of industrious families, with the comforts enjoyed “ by the people of Carne.”—*Plan for the Improvement of Ireland, by Colonel Colebrook.*

hardly be advisable to impose any fresh taxes. The least objectionable mode of proceeding might probably be by raising a loan for a limited period.

Let us hope that if tranquillity at home, and peace abroad, be preserved, capital will be employed in productive channels; industry will increase; and, with returning prosperity, either no necessity will exist for the substitution of any impost in lieu of this; or if it should still be necessary, the nation will be better able to sustain it.

A breathing-time may thus be gained for the distressed agriculturists. To some of them, indeed; I grant, to those who live in the great grazing and dairy counties, the boon may not be of so great advantage; but to all it must produce a certain degree of relief; and we may reasonably trust that the Ministers will, in pursuance of their pledges, extend to this great and paramount national interest whatever relief and support is in their power; whether by a more fair and equal distribution of *county-rates*, and other local burdens, or by measures of a more general character.

A LANDOWNER.





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A letter to the landowners of Great
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